

# Supporting Your Adolescent: Tips for Parents

Adolescence is a time for young people to define their place in the family, peer groups, and the larger community. During this stage of their lives, youth struggle with the transition from childhood to adulthood. During childhood, they depended mainly on their parents for economic and emotional support and direction. In adulthood, though, they will be expected to achieve independence and make choices about school, work, and personal relationships that will affect every aspect of their future.

Without question, adolescence is a difficult time for many young people. During this period, they must contend with physical changes, pressure to conform to current social trends and peer behaviors, and increased expectations from family members, teachers, and other adults. Adolescents also must deal with sometimes conflicting messages from parents, peers, or the media. They struggle with an increasing need to feel as if they "belong." Young people also feel pressure to perform academically or socially.

For some young people, the usual challenges of adolescence are compounded by difficult family situations, overcrowded classrooms, disintegrating neighborhoods, or exposure to alcohol or other drugs. Without support and guidance, these young people may fall victim to behaviors that place them, and others, at risk. In our society, those behaviors include dropping out of school, running away from home, joining gangs, and using alcohol or drugs or becoming involved in other law-breaking behaviors. Some youth may become despondent, leading to academic problems, social isolation, or self-destructive behavior.

## Tips for Parenting When Your Child Becomes an Adolescent

During adolescence, young people begin to take risks and experiment. They do so because they are moving from a family-centered world to the larger community within which they will begin to define their own identity. They may choose friends their parents do not approve of or try alcohol or other drugs. They may wear clothing that is trendy and generational, begin comparing their families' lifestyles with those of other families, or break rules imposed by their parents or the larger community.

Through these actions, young people are testing the limits. They are recreating themselves in a fashion that they believe will allow them to survive without the day-to-day guidance of their parents. They are also trying to shift the balance of power and authority in their own direction. Parents are understandably troubled by the confrontational nature of some adolescent behavior. They also worry about other actions that may threaten the safety of their child.

While there are no easy answers in parenting, the following strategies may help you support your child during adolescence while reducing the risk of serious harm to either your child or another person:

- ★ Educate yourself about adolescent development. Learn about the behaviors to expect, the effects of physical changes, and ways to help your child deal with change.
- ★ Remember your own adolescence: your changing feelings, anger at authority, and fears and hopes. Look at your adolescent's behavior in the context of those memories to help you keep perspective.
- ★ Think about taking a course on good parenting. Parenting is a learned skill. Training can help even experienced parents by giving them new tools for supporting children through adolescence.
- ★ Listen more than talk. Young people have spent at least a decade as listeners in most situations. During adolescence, they want and need the chance to share their feelings and ideas and to begin recasting family beliefs, stories, and traditions in light of their changing identity.
- ★ Teach your adolescent about the joys *and* troubles of life and ways to revel in the good times and cope with the bad. The myths that life is always easy or fair or that one should always be happy can lead to frustration for young people dealing with the realities of life.

★Use positive reinforcement for positive behavior whenever possible; it is far more effective than criticism or punishment for negative behavior. Words that belittle can hurt your adolescent's self-esteem. The most useful tools in raising young people are love, compassion, sensitivity, praise, understanding, and communication.

★Teach your adolescent that rights and responsibilities go hand in hand, and give your child increasing responsibility for his or her personal well-being and that of the family. Provide your child opportunities to help around the house and to become involved in family decision-making discussions. In doing so, seek your child's input and help him or her to understand the process that you use to make those decisions. Look for situations that can allow your child to test decision-making skills with the support of caring adults. Supportive adults can help provide your child with an understanding of the impact of those decisions on both your child and others. They also can assist your adolescent in coping with the results of these choices.

★Help your adolescent move toward independence. For each youth, the need to assert independence will happen at different times and through different means. Becoming attuned to your children's attempts to operate independently will help you support those efforts and provide guidance when early attempts at decision-making result in less than desired outcomes. It is sometimes difficult for parents to give up control out of concern for their child's safety. Remember, though, that adolescents' skills in coping with increasing responsibility will be enhanced by parents' willingness to support them as they make choices and face new challenges.

★Offer your child chances to become involved in the community. All young people are searching to find their place in the world. Involving adolescents in developing solutions to community problems can shift their focus from themselves and help them to develop skills and feel involved and empowered.

★Spend quality *and* quantity time with your adolescent. Adolescence is a time when young people naturally begin to pull away from the family and spend more time at school, with friends, or at a job. Still, time spent with caring parents is key to young people's ability to grow emotionally and socially. Take advantage of times that your adolescent is home, over dinner or watching a ball game, to continue building your relationship. Become involved in your child's outside interests. Your involvement will both show your support and help you stay informed about your child's life.

★Encourage other caring adults, including friends and relatives, to spend time with your adolescent. Aunts and uncles or adult neighbors can offer your child further support, guidance, and attention.

★Accept that you have feelings too. You may feel frustrated, angry, discouraged, or sad during difficult times with your adolescent. Being a good parent doesn't mean being perfect. Model the ability to apologize when you feel that you let your emotions get the best of you. Your example will help your child understand human frailty and ways of mending relationships strained by stress or disagreement.

★Seek support and guidance for *yourself* in dealing with the changes in a child moving through adolescence. Learn about the signs of crisis, and talk with other parents or professionals. By doing so, you can begin to tell the difference between adolescent behavior that indicates a youth in crisis and the usual behavior associated with a life passage.

★Remember that most youth have problems at some time. Acting-out behavior can be a normal part of becoming an adult. Parents sometimes needlessly feel embarrassed when their child is having trouble. Do not assume that your child's behavior always reflects on the quality of your parenting.

★Do not always push for drastic or dramatic solutions. Sometimes young people just need time and support to work through their problems.

★Continue to provide all of your children with positive feedback and opportunities to grow. Reflect on what you wanted for your children during better times: health, happiness, and movement toward a promising future. Offer them chances to strengthen their skills and develop a sense of competence, usefulness, and belonging.

Source: Prepared by the National Clearinghouse on Families & Youth, August 1996